

# First record of Crested *Francolinus sephaena* × Swainson's Francolin *F. swainsonii* hybrids?

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Première donnée d'hybridation entre le Francolin huppé *Francolinus sephaena* et le Francolin de Swainson *F. swainsonii*? Du 30 avril à la fin juillet 2005, un groupe de quatre francolins a été observé dans la réserve de Polokwane, province du Limpopo, Afrique du Sud, comprenant un Francolin huppé *Francolinus sephaena* adulte et trois oiseaux très différents qui ne correspondaient à aucune description dans la littérature. Trois possibilités d'interprétation sont suggérées: soit une livrée de couleur jusqu'ici inconnue du Francolin huppé, soit des hybrides ou des individus aberrants. Les auteurs postulent que les trois oiseaux pourraient bien représenter les premiers cas d'hybridation entre le Francolin huppé et le Francolin de Swainson *F. swainsonii*.

On 30 April 2005, a covey of four francolins was observed in a clearing at Polokwane Game Reserve, Limpopo province, South Africa (23°58'S 29°28'E). The covey comprised an adult Crested Francolin *Francolinus* (*Dendroperdix*) *sephaena* and three strikingly different-looking birds (Fig. 1). Their plumage coloration did not match any description in the literature, namely deep russet-brown, with white streaks and stripes on the breast, belly and upperparts. They had a black mask and contrasting grey crown, affording them a capped appearance. The neck and throat were also paler grey. The bill was black and the legs red. All three were noticeably larger than the Crested Francolin. They were seen on several occasions in the same general area until the end of July 2005. The birds were heard calling twice and their vocalisations matched Crested Francolin. On another occasion, they responded to playback of Crested Francolin but not to Swainson's Francolin (or Spurfowl) *Francolinus* (*Pternistis*) *swainsonii*.

The existence of these birds raises interesting questions. Do they represent a hitherto undescribed colour morph of Crested Francolin? Could they be hybrids, and if so, between which species? Or are they aberrant individuals?

Three subspecies of Crested Francolin, *F. s. sephaena*, *F. s. rovuma* and *F. s. zambesiae*, are recognised, based mainly on plumage coloration (Hockey *et al.* 2005). None of the descriptions of the subspecies match the colour variation we observed. Given the difference in size between the Crested Francolin and the others, we are reluctant to ascribe their different appearance to an aber-

rant colour morph. It is also unlikely that the birds represent a mutation, as mutations are chance events usually affecting a single individual. It is unlikely that the same chance event would affect three birds identically. However unlikely it may seem, we believe that these birds may be hybrids. As far as we can establish, there are no reports in the literature of hybrids involving Crested Francolins (Urban *et al.* 1986, Little *et al.* 2000, Hockey *et al.* 2005, Viljoen 2005). If they are indeed hybrids, then which species might be involved? In addition to Crested Francolin, Polokwane Game Reserve hosts four other francolin and spurfowl species: Coqui Francolin *F. (Peliperdix) coqui*, Shelley's Francolin *F. (Scleroptila) shelleyi*, Natal Francolin (or Spurfowl) *F. (Pternistis) natalensis* and Swainson's Francolin. The three birds most closely resembled Swainson's Francolin in respect of plumage coloration. Although Swainson's Francolin is known to hybridise with two of its congeners, namely Red-necked *F. (Pternistes) afer* and Natal Francolins (Little *et al.* 2000), the chances that it would interbreed with the taxonomically distant Crested Francolin seem very slim. Nevertheless, given their appearance, we postulate that these birds may well be the first recorded Crested × Swainson's Francolin hybrids.

## References

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Figure 1. Is this a Crested Francolin *Francolinus sephaena* × Swainson's Francolin *F. swainsonii* hybrid? Polokwane Game Reserve, South Africa, 2005 (Derek Engelbrecht)

Ceci est-il un hybride entre le Francolin huppé *Francolinus sephaena* et le Francolin de Swainson *F. swainsonii*? (Derek Engelbrecht)

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Received 12 April 2006; revision accepted 8 May 2007.